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**The Irreconcilable Relationship Between Africa and  
America as Portrayed in Teju Cole's *Open City*:**

**The Question of National Identity and the Path towards  
Transnationalism.**

**Treball de Fi de Grau**

**Grau en Estudis Anglesos**

Supervisor: Dr Esther Pujolràs Noguer

Tamara Rodríguez Ferrer

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## Table of Contents

<b>Abstract.....</b>	<b>1</b>
<b>I. Introduction: Analysis of the Development of the Relationship between Africa and America.....</b>	<b>2</b>
<b>II. Africa and America through Julius's Eyes.....</b>	<b>5</b>
<b>III. Julius's Dilemma: The Impossibility to Reconcile Africa and America and the Awakening of the Question of National Identity.....</b>	<b>9</b>
<b>IV. The Black Atlantic, National Identity and the Path towards Transnationalism.....</b>	<b>16</b>
<b>V. Conclusions: The Impact of the Tensions between Africa and America.....</b>	<b>21</b>
<b>VI. Bibliography.....</b>	<b>24</b>

## Abstract

The controversial relationship between Africa and America, which started centuries ago because of the Atlantic Slave Trade, has been a recurrent topic in both American and African literature. Certainly, this tension between the two lands has been portrayed in many different ways depending on the personal experiences of some writers. Following this tradition, Teju Cole recovers this topic in his first novel *Open City*, in which we can see through the figure of its main character, Julius, that this relationship is impossible to reconcile. On the other hand, I will analyse how this conflict clearly alters the construction and the perception of his own identity, and how Cole uses the journey, as well as Joseph Conrad in *Heart of Darkness*, to illustrate this moment of self-discovery and turbulence. I will provide an analysis of Julius's existential crisis from a postcolonial framework that fuses W.E.B Du Bois's *double consciousness* with Paul Gilroy's "black Atlantic experience". I will therefore demonstrate how Julius's existential crisis cannot be separated from his ambivalent "national identity", the impossible reconciliation of his "African" self with his "American" self. The dilemma presented by *double consciousness* points out directly to the need to search for a transnational perspective whereby nationalism should be redefined. In the end, I will also explore the intertextuality between *Open City* and *Heart of Darkness* so as to prove that their characters are presented not only as social products but also as moral entities which readers can judge.

## **I. Introduction: Analysis of the Development of the Relationship between Africa and America.**

The relationship between Africa and America started centuries ago due to the Atlantic Slave Trade, which forced many Africans to leave their roots and their lands in order to go to America and serve as slaves. This fact provoked that some intellectuals, who were born in Africa but had lived in America for many years, started to reflect the consequences and their feelings towards this relationship in their works.

On the one hand, we have those writers that rejected their roots and felt distant from the land they were born in, considering that it was America the country and the culture they belonged to and that they did not have the need to recover a connection with the other land. The clearest example about this feeling of sympathy and admiration for America is found in the poem "On Being Brought from Africa to America" by Phillis Wheatley, the first published Afro-American poet, in which she thanks God for having given her the opportunity to come to America and where we see that she clearly feels very distant from her roots:

Twas mercy brought me from my Pagan land,  
Taught my benighted soul to understand  
That there's a God, that there's a Saviour too:  
Once I redemption neither fought nor knew.  
Some view our fable race with scornful eye,  
"They colour is a diabolic die"  
Remember, Christians, Negroes, black as Cain,  
May be refin'd, and join th' angelic train.

(Shields, 1988:18)

However, one of the major artistic and literary movements, the Harlem Renaissance, changed this conception of Africa in the 1920's. The literature and especially the music produced during this period highlighted the power and the beauty of African culture, portraying Africa as a sort of paradise lost. Some years later, the Black Civil Rights Movement (1954-68), which coincided with the independence of some African countries such as Ghana in 1957, triggered the emigration of some of these intellectuals who wanted to return to their ancestral land and reconcile their

relationship with it. Needless to say, they expressed their feelings and their relationship towards their roots in very different ways. For example, Maya Angelou defended African culture and was involved in numerous projects whose objective was basically to defend the rights of the African-American and the revival of the African culture. Nevertheless, she recognised that her place was in America and not in Africa. This is something that also happened to Langston Hughes, one of the leading figures of the Harlem Renaissance who wrote poems such as the one called "I Too Sing America" in which he manifested his desire to feel an intrinsic part of America regardless of his skin colour. On the contrary, W.E.B Du Bois admitted that he felt utterly attached to his African roots and, as a consequence, when Kwame Nkrumah, the first president of Ghana, offered him Ghanaian citizenship, he apparently decided to renounce his U.S. citizenship and moved to Accra where he died in 1963.

On the other hand, it was in 1964 that the African writer Ama Ata Aidoo illustrated in her first play, *The Dilemma of a Ghost*, how the discrepancies that America and Africa shared were very difficult to reconcile. In this play, we discover the story of Ato and Eulalie, a young couple who after getting married decide to live in Africa together with Ato's family. Eulalie is American and since the very beginning we see that neither Eulalie nor Ato's family can sympathise with each other due to their prejudices and clichés:

EU: I thought that you could do better than clichés. Since you can preach so well, can't you preach to your people to try and have just a little bit of understanding for the things they don't know anything about yet?

ATO: Shut up! How much does the African negro know?

EU: Do you compare these bastards, these stupid narrow-minded savages with us? Do you dare...?

(Aidoo, 1964: 48).

Following this tradition of portraying the ambivalent and controversial relationship between Africa and America, Teju Cole recovers this topic in his first novel *Open City*. Through the figure of Julius, the main character, who tries desperately to reconcile his African identity with his American one, we see how difficult it is to put an end to these tensions and how this conflict affects Julius and the way he builds up his national identity.

The aim of this paper is precisely to analyse how the irreconcilable relationship between Africa and America is portrayed in the novel *Open City* and to demonstrate that this conflict is still a recurrent topic in contemporary literature. In the first section, we will see how Julius describes his contradictory relationship with Africa and America.

In the second part, I will focus on the effects that this irreconcilable tensions have on Julius and his own identity. In order to do this, I will analyse his trip to Europe and the one he embarks on while wandering about the streets of New York, which turns into an introspective journey very similar to the one that we are presented in *Heart of Darkness* by Joseph Conrad.

The last section will provide an explanation to the problem of the question of national identity embodied in the figure of Julius. We will use a post-colonial framework based on the idea of *double consciousness* by W.E.B Du Bois and the reinvention of it by Paul Gilroy in his book *The Black Atlantic. Modernity and Double Consciousness*, whose objective is to prove that the polemics elicited by *double consciousness* is still present nowadays and that it is absolutely necessary to consider a new definition of nationalism which should take a transnational dimension. On the other hand, in this section we will see how the internal conflict that Julius is dealing with gets even worse when we discover something unexpected about his past and we see his shocking reaction, which we can compare again to the one that Marlow undergoes in *Heart of Darkness*.



## II. Africa and America through Julius's Eyes.

When analysing *Open City* it is very important to pay attention to the portrait of America and Africa that we get through Julius in order to understand the internal conflict that this relationship represents for him. As we already know, Julius was born in Nigeria but when he was just a teenager he decided to move to America expecting to have more opportunities to have a better life. He chooses to live in New York and finally studies psychiatry at university, which fortunately allows him to get a good job. At first, it seems that his impressions of New York and, consequently, of America are very positive. However, his irremediable connection with Africa and the discovery of the "dark side" of American society absolutely change his conception and understanding of these two nations and what they represent for him.

First of all, we can see that Julius introduces the city of New York to us as an open city which has offered him the opportunity to succeed in his professional career and where he feels satisfied at a personal level. Moreover, he is fascinated with the city's multiculturalism and becomes an analytic peregrine in his free time. He feels free in America and he highlights this freedom as one of the most important aspects of his life in this land.

Nevertheless, his portrait of the city starts to change as soon as he starts to discover the "dark side" of its society. His criticism on certain aspects of the American society is not explicit but rather a series of anecdotes which readers have to interpret. As Miguel Sayjuko suggests: "His readers will be those who understand that all stories are interconnected, that literature is not mere entertainment, and that art is nothing if not an extended conversation spanning eras, nations and languages." (Sayjuko, 2013: [http://www.nytimes.com/2013/02/27/books/review/Syjuco-t.html?\\_r=0](http://www.nytimes.com/2013/02/27/books/review/Syjuco-t.html?_r=0)). For example, he explains the case of a teenager that suffered from a serious illness which will result in an incapacity for having children in a future. The only solution for him was to freeze his semen so that his future wife could be artificially inseminated. He is very interested in the parents' reaction when they are informed about this:

The parents were open to the idea of sperm storage, and had nothing against artificial insemination, but went resolutely opposed, for religious reasons, to the idea of letting their son masturbate. There was no straightforward surgical solution

to the conundrum. They consulted with me, and after much prayer on their part, they decided to risk not having grandchildren.<sup>1</sup> ( Cole, 2013:13)

Another aspect that we have to take into account is his criticism, on the part of American society, regarding the lack of interest towards African culture and the way Africa is portrayed in some American films following the ancient colonialist conventions, which defended that it was the white man's duty to bring civilisation to this land:

Another film I had watched the previous year, about the crimes of large pharmaceutical companies in East Africa, had left me feeling frustrated, not because of its plot, which was plausible, but because of the film's fidelity to the convention of the good white man in Africa. Africa was always waiting, a substrate for the white man's will, a backdrop of activities". (29)

Needless to say, racism is a topic which impinges on his life experience thus framing his story. Julius explains an experience he had to go through while he was in the subway and some children were insulting him while their parents seemed reluctant to face the conflict. Despite the fact that it is a disgusting experience for him, it is important to highlight that he does not pay much attention to the problem and assumes that racism is something ingrained at the core of American society:

Hey mister, she said, turning to me, wassup? She made signs with her fingers and, with her brother, started laughing. The little boy wore an imitation Chinese peasant's hat. They had been mimicking slanted eyes and exaggerated bows before they came to where I was. They now both turned to me. Are you a gangster, mister? They both flashed gang signs, or their idea of gang signs. I looked at them, It was midnight, I didn't feel like giving public lectures. He's black, said the girl, but he's not dressed like a gangster (...) Twenty yards away, their parents talked with each other, oblivious. (31)

As we have seen, Julius uses on purpose his own experiences to question and criticise all those aspects of the American society he cannot feel identified with. As Giles Foden claims in his book review: "Reading *Open City*, it is important to bear the title in mind, and not become impaled on fixed ideas about what kind of person Julius is. Otherwise one might assume that his contemplations should be taken at face value". (Foden, 2011: <https://www.theguardian.com/books/2011/aug/17/open-city-teju-cole-review>). By analysing these examples, we can see that Julius's perception of the city he

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<sup>1</sup> Cole, T. *Open City*. New York: Random House, 2011. Henceforth, references to this book are indicated by page number.

lives in has changed radically. The city of New York, which was presented as free and open has now taken another dimension for him and for the reader.

Furthermore, we also need to bear in mind that Julius is constantly alluding to his life in Africa and, as a consequence, we can also discuss which kind of relationship he shares with it. As has been mentioned previously, he abandoned Nigeria, the place where he was born, because he wanted to have a prosperous life in America. It is worth mentioning that in New York he meets many immigrants who went through the same experience as him and decided that America was the ideal place to pursue their dreams. As Michiko Kakutani claims:

Most of all, the New York of Mr. Cole — a writer, photographer and historian who was raised in Nigeria and came to the United States in 1992 — is a city of immigrants: Nigerians, Kenyans, Syrians, Lebanese, Malians, Haitians, Chinese and others who have come to escape the sorrows of their own history or to pursue their versions of the American dream. (Kakutani, 2011: [http://www.nytimes.com/2011/05/19/books/open-city-by-teju-cole-book-review.html?\\_r=1](http://www.nytimes.com/2011/05/19/books/open-city-by-teju-cole-book-review.html?_r=1))

Julius does not remember his childhood in Africa as an idyllic one. Their parents brought him up very strictly and they even sent him to the Nigerian Military School where he could receive an education based on discipline. At that moment, the relationship with his mother, who is German and white, was already a very distant one but, on the contrary, he felt a sort of sympathy for his father that he could not explain:

In September, my parents drove me up again. On this second drive, sitting in the backseat, I recall wrestling with myself about my unexamined loyalty to my father and my growing antipathy toward my mother. (77)

This cold and almost inexistent relationship with his parents and his family living in Africa is clearly illustrated on the day of his father's funeral. Julius is only fourteen years old and despite being a difficult moment, taking into account that he has lost an important figure, he only exchanges very few words with his mother and acts as his family tells him to do. Moreover, when he recovers this moment some years later, he acknowledges that it is not his father's death what he remembers but the day of the funeral in itself, which denotes that perhaps this was not a traumatic loss for him:

In the later years, it was the date of the burial, not that of the death, that I marked as an anniversary. I almost remembered the former, and on May 9 of this year, I was on the train to the way to work when it came to my mind that he had been committed to earth for exactly eighteen years. (228)

On the other hand, it is important to stress that his life in Africa and his relationship with it are topics which Julius tries to avoid discussing because he does not feel comfortable when dealing with them in public. In fact, he recognises that Nigeria is almost forgotten for him although he still remembers the people and the things that he has chosen to keep in his mind for the rest of his life:

The past, if there is such a thing, is mostly empty space, great expanses of nothing, in which significant persons and events float. Nigeria was like that for me: mostly forgotten, except for those few things that I remembered with an outsize intensity. These were the things that had been solidified in my mind by reiteration, that recurred in dreams and daily thoughts: certain faces, certain conversations, which taken as a group, represented a secure version of the past that I had been constructing since 1992. (155)

Broadly speaking, we could claim that Julius shares a controversial relationship with both Africa and America. He assumes that America has offered him the possibility to succeed in his professional career as psychiatrist and he considers that New York is a place where he feels free and fulfilled. However, there are certain aspects of American society that he can neither understand nor justify. As we have seen before, he uses his personal experience and anecdotes and it is the reader's duty to work out the criticism that he is trying to convey through these stories.

This kind of relationship is very similar to the one that he shares with Africa. He was born in Nigeria but he decided to abandon his country in order to search for better opportunities in America. His family background is not an ideal one as his relationship with his parents, and especially with his mother, has always been a very distant one and practically inexistent in the present-day. Nevertheless, he admits that he has not forgotten his past in Nigeria because it is the country that he was born in and he admits that he remembers some people and some things about his childhood and his life there.

Needless to say, it is vital to bear in mind the relationship that Julius shares with these two nations in order to understand how they affect the way he understands his own self. The next section will provide a detailed analysis and discussion about how Julius's understanding of Africa and America affects the construction of his own identity.

### **III. Julius's Dilemma: The Impossibility to Reconcile Africa and America and the Awakening of the Question of National Identity.**

As exemplified in Part One, Julius is always moving within an ambivalence which is difficult to come to terms with. Nevertheless, Julius does try to reconcile his feelings and his turbulent relationship with Africa and America. Although Julius is not in touch with his family and hardly ever speaks about them, he certainly remembers his German grandmother and the times he shared with her in Africa with nostalgia and tenderness. As a result, he decides to go to Brussels, where his grandmother is supposed to live, at least to try to recover or continue a relationship with someone who he shared a part of his past in Africa with. As Miguel Syjuco points out in his book review:" Thus he decides to visit Brussels, with the vague notion of finding his aging German grandmother, his remaining link to his maternal past". (Syjuco, 2011: [http://www.nytimes.com/2011/02/27/books/review/Syjuco-t.html?\\_r=0](http://www.nytimes.com/2011/02/27/books/review/Syjuco-t.html?_r=0)). Unfortunately, it is impossible for him to get some information about his grandmother and he will never know how their relationship would have continued.

However, it is this trip which gives Julius the opportunity to discover Europe and to meet different people from different cultures. Julius starts to get on well with two Muslims living in Brussels and they have interesting conversations in which they exchange their own impressions about politics, society and obviously America. It is in one of these conversations when the issue of racism in America appears. One of the Muslims asks Julius if the American blacks are what people see on television, suggesting that American blacks are only interested in rap and hip-hop basically because this is the only alternative that American society gives them. At this moment, Julius states clearly that this is an unfair portrayal on the part of Europe and other countries about how American blacks are positioned within American society:

In the same way, American blacks are like any other Americans; they are like other people. They hold the same kinds of jobs, they live in normal houses, they send their children to school. Many of them are poor, that is true, for reasons of history, and many of them do like hip-hop and devote their lives to it, but it's also true that some of them are engineers, university professors, lawyers, and generals. Even the last two secretaries of state have been black. (119)

The same situation occurs when they talk about what happened in the attacks of the Twin Towers and the Muslims justify the incidents saying that in fact, "America is a version of Al-Qaeda" (122). Julius thinks that there are no arguments to justify the

atrocities committed even though they may understand the political reasons behind it. He does not try to change their perception of America because he knows that it responds to cultural facts and stereotypes, but he does feel the need to express his opinions and, as a member of American society, tries to indicate the necessity to get rid of them.

It is in Belgium where Julius experiments for the first time what being black in an European context is like. During these days in Brussels, he has time to read some newspapers and he has the opportunity to see that racism is not something limited to the United States. He reads articles which are definitely against immigration and he listens to some politicians, during the elections, claiming that it is necessary to vote discontent for immigration:

One journalist wrote on his blog that Belgian society was fed up with "murdering, thieving, raping Vikings from North Africa". This was quoted approvingly in certain mainstream sources". (99)

We can compare his experience of "blackness" in Europe with the one that some intellectuals such as W.E.B. Du Bois or Richard Wright went through in their respective lifetime. Both authors, who are relevant in the domain of Afro-American and post-colonial studies, defended that politics were made by and for whites. They both travelled to Europe and realised that the question of national identity was indissolubly interconnected with race. As British Paul Gilroy, who has based his work on many of Du Bois's and Wright's ideas, suggests at the beginning of *The Black Atlantic*:

Striving to be both European and black requires some specific forms of double consciousness. By saying this I do not mean to suggest that taking on either of these unfinished identities necessarily exhausts the subjective resources of any particular individual. However, where racist, nationalist or ethnically absolutist discourses orchestrate political relationships so that these identities appear to be mutually exclusive, occupying the space between them or trying to demonstrate their continuity has been viewed as a provocative and even oppositional act of political insubordination. (Gilroy, 1993:1)

As we can see, this trip to Europe becomes not only his need to recover his lost relationship with his grandmother, but also an introspective journey in which he realises that up to a certain point and even though he criticises some aspects of American society, he feels forced to defend the stereotypes that other countries have built upon it

and placed at the core of their cultures. Moreover, he has become aware of what being black in Europe represents, and how racism and immigration, which are problems that really affect him, are not exclusive to the United States, but rather a worldwide phenomena.

When he comes back to America, he becomes aware of the difficulties to reconcile his relationship with Africa due to his frustrated attempt to encounter his grandmother in Belgium, and the fact that he knows that it is very difficult to re-establish his relationship with his family living in Africa, particularly with his mother. We should add that he does not seem to be prepared nor predisposed to make an effort and give an opportunity to his African family.

As a consequence, he increases his pilgrimages through the streets of New York City so as to be able to organise his thoughts and see if there is a possibility which may allow him to fully reconcile his tensions with America and its society. As Michiko Kakutani remarks in his book review:

Meanwhile, Julius spends a lot of time thinking about death and the meaning of life, the relationship between the political and the personal, racism and identity, exile and nationality. He is the sort of person who takes his time at the post office, deciding which stamps to buy to put on a package, spurning anything with a flag and looking for something aesthetically pleasing. (Kakutani, 2011: [http://www.nytimes.com/2011/05/19/books/open-city-by-teju-cole-book-review.html?\\_r=1](http://www.nytimes.com/2011/05/19/books/open-city-by-teju-cole-book-review.html?_r=1))

It is precisely in one of this analytic and ontological peregrinations when one of the most revealing moments of the novel occurs. While Julius is walking down on a street, he realises that some boys are looking at him very suspiciously. He notices that but does not pay too much attention, as they seem not to be very interested in what he is doing and seem finally to have disappeared. However, he encounters them after a while and Julius is brutally attacked without any justification:

We were in the day's last night, and the street was largely in shadow. It was unlikely they would have recognized me again even in strong daylight. Still, I was unnerved. And it was in the middle of that thought that I felt the first blow, on my shoulder. A second, heavier, landed on the small of my back, and my legs gave way like sticks. I fell to the ground. I don't recall if I cried out, or if opening my mouth I was unable to make a sound. They began to kick me all over-shins, back, arms- a quick, preplanned choreography. I shouted, begging them to stop, conscious of a man on the ground being beaten. Then I lost the will to speak, and took the blows in silence. The initial awareness of pain was gone, but now came the anticipation of how much it would hurt later, how bad tomorrow would be, for both my body and my mind. (212).

This moment will have a tremendous impact on Julius and will bear important consequences for him. First of all, it is worth mentioning that he states very clearly that the two boys were Afro-American, which is something very harmful for him, as he had considered them to be like "brothers". He assumes that they both share a common heritage with him due to their skin colour, but the cruel reality is that they have beaten him and mocked him, and this is something which really overwhelms him.

Once he has assumed what has happened, he starts a process to minimise the cruel reality and the truth of the events. He is in the street and he sees some pedestrians in the distance, but he does not want to ask for help. He just picks himself up and starts his way back home. At his house, he heals himself and decides that it is not necessary to go to a hospital to check that he has not been severely injured. Besides, he does not call the police or any of his friends to inform them about the problem and he is constantly convincing himself that this situation is unfortunately, something inevitable:

Now every cliché by which the assault could be minimized came to my mind hurried to claim space in my head. These things happen, it was only a matter of time, count you blessing, and, yes, it could have been worse. - and such a bile rose into my throat at these thoughts. (215)

Taking into account that he works as a psychiatrist and that he has to be dealing with people every day, he invents an excuse to be absent from his work and have time to recover himself without being discovered. He also starts to remember some of his colleagues' anecdotes about being attacked or robbed in the street and, at this moment, he seems to acknowledge that he was not expecting to go through an experience such as this one:

I had listened to the others' stories of being mugged. A colleague on the service had had her purse snatched. One of the nurses- A burly, soft-spoken Portuguese-American- had had his jaw broken by a gang, and they had left his wallet, his watch, his gold chain, and taken only his iPod. He'd needed seventeen stitches across his face. Violence for sport was no strange thing in the city, but now: me. I had cleaned the wounds on my shoulders, arms, and legs, mostly numerous small bruises that would heal quickly. My disfigured mouth and my hand troubled me most. (216)

Considering his particular way of dealing with this traumatic experience, it would be quite interesting to point at the idea of *shame* to justify his behaviour. As we have seen previously, his main objective is basically to disguise what has happened and to prevent people from discovering it. The fact that he does not go to the police or to the



hospital reveals that he does not want to deal with the problem in public. Perhaps he is frustrated because when he saw the boys for the first time he thought that he could identify himself with them and obviously, he was not even considering the possibility that they would react in such a violent and irrational way. Unfortunately, all his thoughts vanish when he faces the inescapable reality, and it must be indeed very difficult for Julius to admit that he has been mugged by some strangers that he regarded as equals.

After having analysed his understanding and his reaction towards this situation, it is inevitable and convenient to consider and indicate the terrible consequences that all this will have for Julius. This traumatic experience is, in fact, the convergence of his two trips: his trip to Europe and his trip through the streets of New York. We should remember that he had the desire to see his grandmother again and that he went to Europe with this objective, which finally was in vain because it was impossible to get some information about her. Nonetheless, he had the chance to discover Europe and be in touch with people with different cultural backgrounds to his. In Belgium we saw how Julius defended America and criticised the stereotypes built upon its society, simply because he felt inclined to do it and he felt he was also part of America.

The conflict with the two black teenagers marks the ending of these two ontological trips. At this precise moment, Julius is forced to recognise and to accept his dilemma: the impossibility to reconcile his relationship with Africa and America. Although he has been constantly seeking aspects which could lead to the reconciliation of this turbulent and irremediable tension, the brutality with which he is attacked and the impossibility to find a plausible justification of the acts, is something that deeply hurts him and which he finds impossible to endure.

In the same direction, it would be helpful to consider other psychological journeys found in literature which we could compare and equate to the one that Julius goes through in *Open City*. This demonstrates that this novel should be considered as part of a literary tradition which describes psychological journeys that started centuries ago with Homer's famous *Odyssey*. The intertextual link between Julius's journey in *Open City* and that of Marlow's in Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* has already been noted. We all know that Marlow travels to Africa in search of a powerful ivory trader called

Kurtz. Nevertheless, on his journey to find this enigmatic character, he becomes aware of the atrocities committed in Africa on the part of the Belgian Empire.

In the case of Marlow, his narrative consists of two journeys which are interconnected. Through the figure of Kurtz he will discover the methods that he has used in order to exert his power over the local population, and how they are systematically tortured. From the very beginning, Marlow pinpoints racism as the key element which is used to justify this inhumane treatment.

They walked erect and slow, balancing small baskets full of earth on their heads, and the clink kept time with their footsteps. Back rags were wound round their loins, and the short ends behind wagged to and fro like tails. I could see every rib, the joints of their limbs were like knots in a rope, each had an iron collar on his neck, and all were connected together with a chain whose brights swung between them, rhythmically clinking. Another report from the cliff made me think suddenly of that ship of war I had seen firing into a continent. It was the same kind of ominous voice; but these men could by no stretch of imagination be called enemies. They were called criminals, and the outraged law, like bursting shells, had come to them, an insoluble mystery from over the sea. (Conrad, 1988: 18).

Apart from the discovery of this system of tortures, he also has the opportunity to see the effects that being part of the institution of imperialism represents at a personal level. For understanding this, it is necessary to analyse the scene of Kurtz's death, subservient to multiple interpretations. I will interpret this scene as Kurtz's moment of illumination before he dies in which he realises all the atrocities he has committed in Africa and the real psychological dimension of imperialism:

Anything approaching the change that came over his features I have never seen before, and hope never to see again. Oh, I wasn't touched. I was fascinated. It was though a veil had been rent. I saw on that ivory face the expression of sombre pride, of ruthless power, of craven terror- of an intense and hopeless despair. Did he live his life again in every detail of desire, temptation, and surrender during that supreme moment of complete knowledge? He cried in a whisper at some image, at some vision-he cried out twice, a cry that was no more than a breath- "The horror! the horror!".(86).

As mentioned earlier, Marlow's journey becomes not only physical but unquestionably an introspective and psychological one, which we can likewise apply to Julius. In the case of Marlow, his journey makes him become aware of the real atrocities that were perpetrated in Africa under the domain of imperialism. He sees how Africans are tortured and treated like animals and how this is sustained by means of racism. Besides, his approximation to the figure of Kurtz allows him to discover the psychological effects that imperialism can have for a person who has been willingly and

consciously taking part of its machinery. Taking this experience in Africa as a starting point, he will start to criticise his moral values and by extension, those of Western civilisation. It will be interesting to mention as well that the criticism that Marlow conveys throughout his narrative is exactly the same as Julius- a criticism which is implicit in the novel and that readers have to work out-.

In the case of Julius, we have seen through a close analysis of the novel that both his trip to Europe and the one through New York are united at the moment when he is brutally attacked. Due to this traumatic experience, he has to endure the dilemma of the impossibility to reconcile Africa and America, which is something that really affects him psychologically, as this discovery makes him start to question his identity, who he really is and what to do with this complicated cultural background, whose tensions he cannot dissipate easily because there are certain aspects which do not fully depend on him. The last section will focus on the question of national identity based on Du Bois's idea of *double-consciousness* which Paul Gilroy's appropriates to explain modernity and to claim a redefinition of nationalism and nationalist ideas.

#### **IV. The Black Atlantic, National Identity and the Path towards Transnationalism.**

Once we have understood Julius's dilemma, it is paramount to try to provide an explanation to this phenomenon. In order to do this, we are going to explore how Paul Gilroy uses the idea of *double consciousness* by W.E.B Du Bois in his book *The Black Atlantic. Modernity and Double Consciousness* so as to prove that the controversy around national identity is a problem derived from what he calls "the black Atlantic World", and how this theory can illustrate why Julius cannot reconcile his relationship with Africa and America.

Du Bois's theory of double consciousness appeared for the first time in *The Souls of Black Folk* published in 1903. This concept was created by Du Bois in an attempt to reflect the difficulties to reconcile the fact of being black and an American citizen, as he realised that politics and the basis of national identity were in the hands of the whites, especially since the spread of nationalism and nationalist ideas in the 19th century. In the beginning, nationalism was presented as a force capable of propagating a sentiment among those people belonging to the same nation. However, the truth is that nationalism was created to establish boundaries between populations and to support the machinery and the institution of imperialism and colonialism through racial discourses, which still remain in our imaginary (Anderson, 1983). Following Du Bois's theory, Paul Gilroy appropriates this idea of *double consciousness* to explain that these difficulties to reconcile several identities is the result of the Black Atlantic experience, and that Modernity cannot be understood without taking into account this historical background:

This book addresses one small area in the grand consequence of this historical conjunction- the stereophonic, bilingual, or bifocal cultural forms originated by, but no longer the exclusive property of, blacks dispersed within the structures of feeling, producing, communicating, and remembering that I have heuristically called the black Atlantic World. (Gilroy, 1993:3)

However, we must also bear in mind that American nationalism is a clear example which proves that racism played an essential role in the construction of nationalist discourses. We all know that America was introduced as the "promised land" or even as the "land of freedom". Nevertheless, we also know that this was not the philosophy that was implemented at the core of American identity. Peoples of colour were neither considered human beings nor ordinary citizens, that is to say, they were not considered Americans because of race issues:

It is important, however, to note that there is a crucial difference between white Americans embracing their ethnic heritage and exhibiting this kind of symbolic ethnicity and the peoples of colour in the nation encouraging national pride. The latter were much less likely to be assimilated into mainstream American society. The melting pot absorbed the ethnic identities of immigrants of European descent much more easily than those of Asian, African or Mexican origin. ( Henderson, 2009:139)

Needless to say, this is not something that happened exclusively in America, but also in Europe. Du Bois himself witnessed how racial discourses to support white supremacy were spread among European universities by some important intellectuals of the era, which caused him a profound discontent that he would reflect later in his future works. According to Paul Gilroy, this traumatic experience of race in Europe demonstrates "the problems of racialised ontology and identity- the tension between being and becoming black". (Gilroy:116)

These racialised nationalisms are still present in our current society and they are, with no doubts, a direct consequence of the black Atlantic. In *Open City*, which is a contemporary work, the figure of Julius embodies the new generations who need to continue fighting against these prejudices. As Paul Gilroy states: "However, I want to suggest that Du Bois produced this concept at the junction point of his philosophical and psychological interests not just to express the distinctive standpoint of black Americans but also to illuminate the experience of post-slave populations in general" (Gilroy:126).

It seems that we all want a multicultural environment in which everybody feels identified regardless of their origins or their culture. Nonetheless, the *Refugees Crisis* has proved that Europe is incapable of creating this cultural space, as it is impossible for these people to reconcile the fact of having their own nationalities and the fact of becoming part of the European Union, and that we continue justifying our attitudes towards immigration by means of archaic nationalist discourses whose objective is just to avoid recognising that we are the result of years of invasion, colonisation and cultural exchange.

Certainly, Julius's main problem resides in the fact that he has been brought up in a multicultural background. He is the product of imperialism, colonialism and even miscegenation- his mother and grandmother are German and white- and feels forced to decide which culture is going to define him in terms of national identity. It would be

convenient to remark that although his mother lives in Africa and loves this land, she admits that she has never considered herself as part of it. As we have seen in previous sections, he cannot fully identify himself with Africa and America and he does not have a very positive experience in Europe, as he sees that even in a European context there exist the same problems that he has been confronting so far. For this reason, we could affirm that his dilemma is indeed a question of *double consciousness* because of his difficulties to reconcile the fact of being African and American, including as well his European experience. This situation, obviously, has a terrible effect on Julius, as he cannot trace his identity and does not know who he is or what to do so as to be able to discover it. Unfortunately, Julius embodies the question and not the answer to this conflict.

Furthermore, the accident with the two Afro-American boys proves that it is necessary to choose between being American or being African and that one option excludes automatically the other one. If we analyse their reaction from a nationalist perspective, we could claim that they react in such a violent way because this is their way to confirm and show that they are truly Americans and that they reject their roots.

Sorting this problem out would represent a reformulation of the definition of nationality in order to be able to construct a truly multicultural society. The first step to take would be to understand that we are all a product of history and that these horrible years of imperialism and colonialism, which Paul Gilroy encodes as the black Atlantic, have created a new society which needs to be redefined. For this reason, we must look for a definition of nationalism that will go beyond ethnicity and point out a *transnational* dimension:

In opposition to both these nationalist or ethnically absolute approaches, I want to develop the suggestion that cultural historians could take the Atlantic as one single, complex unit of analysis in their discussions of the modern world and use it to produce an explicitly transnational and intercultural perspective. (Gilroy:14)

After having analysed the effects that Julius's dilemma has on the way he perceives and defines his own identity and how this is extremely interconnected to our social panorama, it is essential to provide an analysis on how the reader perceives Julius. From the very beginning, we know that his attempts to reconcile Africa and America are going to be indeed futile, but we sympathise with his personality and in the end we feel compassion towards him because of the situation he is wrapped in. By

contrast, this perception changes radically when we reach the end of the novel. Julius is invited at one of his friend's party and here we discover that he presumably forced himself on a girl many years ago:

And then with the same flat affect, she said that, in late 1989, when she was fifteen and I was a year younger, at a party her brother had hosted at their house in Ikoyi, I had forced myself on her. Afterward, she said, her eyes unwavering from the bright river below, in the weeks that followed, in the months and years that followed, I had acted like I knew nothing about it, had even forgotten her, to the point of not recognizing her when we met again, and had never tried to acknowledge what I had done. (244)

Julius's reaction is shocking and breathtaking. We expect him to react and try to defend himself, but the reality is that he does not say anything. He decides to come back home and does not refer to the problem anymore. The fact that we are left with no answer makes us question inevitably his moral values and the way he confronts the situation. At this point we have to judge Julius at a personal level regardless of his identity problem and his frustration.

This situation and this reaction is again very similar to the one that Marlow shows in *Heart of Darkness*. After Kurtz dies, he meets his girlfriend who wants to know about Kurtz's death as she obviously was not present at the moment. At the end of the conversation, she asks Marlow about the last words that Kurtz articulated before passing away. Marlow decides to tell her that the last word Kurtz pronounced was her name instead of the famous sentence "The horror! The horror!":

" His last word- to live with, she murmured. "Don't you understand I loved him-I loved him-I loved him!

" I pulled myself altogether and spoke slowly.

"The last word he pronounced was your name" (Conrad, 1899:96)

Although we know that Marlow was aware of the atrocities that Kurtz had committed when he was still alive, he feels the need not to reveal the truth. On the one hand, we could say that this is a gesture on his part in an attempt to comfort this girl and make her believe that his boyfriend was a remarkable man who deserves to be remembered in this way. On the other hand, it is also true that Marlow lies because he wants to protect himself from the experiences he has had to go through and which he has definitely buried:

Would they have fallen, I wonder, if I had rendered Kurtz that justice which was his due? Hadn't he said he wanted only justice? But I couldn't. I could not tell her. It would have been too dark-too dark altogether..." (96)

In the case of Julius, his behaviour could be also analysed in this regard. If we consider that the facts the girl exposed were true, we could claim that Julius reacts in this way because he wants to avoid the pain that reopening certain scars from the past will mean, especially if we take into account that he is already immersed in an internal conflict which does not seem to have a plausible answer.

This section has analysed in detail Julius's dilemma through the concept of *double consciousness* that W.E.B Du Bois created and that Paul Gilroy has reinvented to explore the dimension and the consequences of what he has called "the black Atlantic". Julius's impossibility to reconcile his relationship with Africa and America resides in the fact that he is a product of imperialism, colonialism and that, as a result, he is the archetype of a new form of society which presents serious ambivalences regarding the question of national identity. Julius, as many people nowadays, feels forced to decide if his identity is going to be either based on his "Africanness" or his "Americanness" as the mixture of the two proves to be impossible due to the nationalist definitions and boundaries based on prevailing racial discourses. For this reason, Paul Gilroy advocates for a reconsideration of the definition of nationalism which delineates the idea of *Transnationalism*. We have seen how this internal conflict that Julius is going through coincides at the end of the novel with a terrible confession from his past that echoes that of Marlow in *Heart of Darkness*., hence linking Cole's *Open City* with the "heart of darkness", which, as Achebe stated in his emblematic essay, "plagues us still" (Achebe, 1975: 9).



## **V. Conclusions: The Impact of the Tensions between Africa and America**

*Open City* by Teju Cole brings to the fore the complex and ambiguous relationship that Julius shares with both Africa and America. As we already know, he decides to emigrate to America searching for better opportunities for his life. He chooses to live in New York and at first it all seems to be fascinating and comfortable. Certainly, he finally studies psychiatry in an American university and starts to work in a hospital there. Moreover, he discovers that New York is a multicultural city in which he can feel free and becomes a habitual peregrine of its streets.

Nevertheless, his perception changes drastically when he discovers what we have called the "dark side" of American society which refers to the aspects of its society he cannot feel identified with. These aspects include racism and the lack of interest on the part of the American society towards African culture. Needless to say, he alludes to his past in Africa in several times and admits that he has decided to keep the good memories about this part of his life. Unfortunately, his relationship with his family is practically inexistent, particularly with his mother, and, for this reason, he feels distant from his roots.

This contradictory relationship between these two lands has important consequences for Julius and especially for the creation of his own identity. His objective and his desire is precisely to be able to reconcile these tensions although, as we have proved, his attempts are indeed futile. He remembers his grandmother, who was German, a lot and, especially, the good times they shared in Africa. This nostalgic feeling towards his grandmother makes him travel to Belgium to try to discover if she is still alive and if it is possible for them to recover their relationship. However, it is impossible for him to get some information about her and gives up the idea of seeing her again. On the contrary, it is in Europe where he has an opportunity to meet some people with different cultural backgrounds from his who project an image of America based on stereotypes and clichés. For the first time, we see how Julius feels forced to defend and dismantle these prejudices against American society. Furthermore, he also has the chance to experience "blackness" in Europe and to discover that racism is not something exclusive of America but rather a universal problem.

When he comes back to America and becomes aware of the difficulties to reconcile this relationship with Africa, he increases his pilgrimages through the streets

of New York so as to see if he can at least give a chance to his relationship with America. These pilgrimages turn into an introspective journey in which he starts to think who he really is and how he should define his own identity. It is precisely in one of his numerous walks when he is brutally attacked by some Afro-Americans. We have identified this moment as the convergence of both his trip to Europe and his introspective journey. At this point, he knows that there is nothing he can do to reconcile his *double consciousness* dilemma and that there is no way to reunite Africa and America. We have also seen that this introspective journey of self-discovery is also present in *Heart of Darkness*, as the main character, Marlow, narrates his physical journey in Africa which is connected to his discovery of the atrocities derived from the imperialist machinery and his consequent questioning of the values of Western civilisation.

Julius's dilemma is in fact a question of national identity which can be analysed applying Du Bois's theory of *double consciousness*, a term coined to explain the difficulties to reconcile the fact of being black and an American citizen. This theory has later been recreated by Paul Gilroy in his book called *The Black Atlantic. Modernity and Double Consciousness* to prove that our society is still immersed in the ambivalence regarding the question of national identity that *double consciousness* represents.

In fact, Julius's problem is precisely his need to decide between being African or American despite the fact that he does not fully identify himself with none of them. This problem is something that not only affects him but also millions of people. In America, there are many immigrants who have been accepted and who have found a place in this land to forge their lives and achieve their goals. Nevertheless, it is also necessary to stress that at a social level, they still feel they are not fully tolerated because of some remaining racial discourses, and that this situation creates a tension which affects the way they perceive and trace their national identity as is the case of Julius in *Open City*.

This problem leads to another question which makes us think that perhaps it is time to start to think about redefining nationalism and the basis on which it has been constructed. The spread of nationalism in the 19th century brought new ideas and different ways to justify imperialism and, therefore, colonialism through racial discourses. The aim of this new conception was to defend that Western civilisation's duty was to civilise other lands such as Africa. In order to debunk these prevailing

prejudices it would be convenient to consider and define the question of national identity from a transnational perspective which would respond to the postcolonial nature of our current society.

Finally, we have seen that Julius has to confront a difficult situation at the end of the novel, when we discover the testimony of a girl that he presumably forced himself on her many years ago. Even though we expect him to react and try to deny the facts or just make the effort to defend himself, he does not say anything because he wants to protect himself so as not to reopen certain scars from the past which will be very harmful and which he is not prepared to endure, taking into account that he is already confronting an internal conflict which seems not to have a satisfactory answer.

This reaction on the part of Julius is very similar to the one that the character of Marlow shows in *Heart of Darkness*. He knows that Kurtz has committed numerous atrocities and that before his death, he had a moment of illumination in which he became aware of the cruel reality of the institution and the machinery of imperialism. However, when his girlfriend asks him the last words he pronounced before passing away, he decides to lie and tells her that it was her name the last thing he said. In this case, Marlow also wants to comfort this girl and also acknowledges that he has had reacted in this way because confessing the truth would have meant going back to some dark memories which he has definitely buried and condemned to forgiveness. Both cases leave the reader the responsibility of judging the two characters not only as social products of their time but also as moral entities whose behaviours should be questioned.

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